

Constitution of the United States - Federalists Versus Anti-federalists

government madison national papers country rights citizens confederation

After the Constitution was signed and approved by delegates of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, it had to be ratified by the states. As determined by Article VII of the Constitution, ratification required the approval of nine special state conventions. States that did not ratify the Constitution would not be considered a part of the Union and would be separate countries.

Passage of the Constitution by the states was by no means certain in 1787. Indeed, many people at that time opposed the creation of a federal, or national, government that would have power over the states. These people were called Anti-Federalists. They included primarily farmers and tradesmen and were less likely to be a part of the wealthy elite than were members of their opposition, who called themselves Federalists. The Anti-Federalists believed that each state should have a sovereign, independent government. Their leaders included some of the most influential figures in the nation, including **PATRICK HENRY** and **GEORGE MASON**, leading national figures during the Revolutionary War period. Many Anti-Federalists were local politicians who feared losing power should the Constitution be ratified. As one member of their opposition, **EDMUND RANDOLPH**, said, these politicians "will not cherish the great oak which is to reduce them to paltry shrubs."

The Federalists favored the creation of a strong federal government that would more closely unite the states as one large, continental nation. They tended to come from the wealthier class of merchants and plantation owners. Federalists had been instrumental in the creation of the Constitution, arguing that it was a necessary improvement on the **ARTICLES OF CONFEDERATION**, the country's first attempt at unifying the states in a national political arrangement. Leaders among the Federalists included two men who helped develop the Constitution, **JAMES MADISON** and **ALEXANDER HAMILTON**, and two national heroes whose support would greatly improve the Federalists' prospects for winning, **GEORGE WASHINGTON** and **BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**.

Between September 17, 1787, the day the Constitution was signed by the Constitutional Convention, and May 29, 1790, the day Rhode Island became the thirteenth and last state to ratify the Constitution, the Federalists and Anti-Federalists engaged in a fierce national debate on the merits of the Constitution. This debate occurred in meeting halls, on streets, and on the printed page. Both sides in the argument had a considerable following. Many of the questions raised remain with us today: What is the best form of government? What rights must the government protect? Which government powers should be granted to the states, and which to the federal government?

The Anti-Federalists The Anti-Federalists found many problems in the Constitution. They argued that the document would give the country an entirely new and untested form of government. They saw no sense in throwing out the existing government. Instead, they believed that the Federalists had over-stated the current problems of the country. They also maintained that the Framers of the Constitution had met as an elitist group under a veil of secrecy and had violated the provisions of the Articles of Confederation in the means selected for ratification of the Constitution.

In making their arguments, the Anti-Federalists often relied on the rhetoric of the Revolutionary War era, which stressed the virtues of local rule and associated centralized power with a tyrannical monarch. Thus, the Anti-Federalists frequently claimed that the Constitution represented a step away from the democratic goals of the American Revolution and toward the twin evils of monarchy and aristocracy. The Anti-Federalists feared that the Constitution gave the president too much power

and that the proposed Congress would be too aristocratic in nature, with too few representatives for too many people. They also criticized the Constitution for its lack of a **BILL OF RIGHTS** of the kind that had been passed in England in 1689 to establish and guarantee certain rights of Parliament and of the English people against the king. Moreover, the Anti-Federalists argued that the Constitution would spell an end to all forms of self-rule in the states.

Many Anti-Federalists believed in a type of government that has been described as agrarian republicanism. Such a government is centered on a society of landowning farmers who participate in local politics. **THOMAS JEFFERSON** agreed with this view. He felt that the virtues of democratic freedom were best nurtured in an agrarian, or agricultural, society, and that with increasing urbanization, commercialization, and centralization of power would come a decline in political society and eventual tyranny. Unlike the Anti-Federalists, however, Jefferson supported the Constitution, although rather reluctantly. He was not strongly identified with the Federalist position and would eventually oppose the Federalists as a member of the **DEMOCRATIC-REPUBLICAN PARTY**.

The Anti-Federalists also shared the feeling that so large a country as the United States could not possibly be controlled by one national government. One Pennsylvania Anti-Federalist, who signed his articles "Centinel," declared,

It is the opinion of the greatest writers, that a very extensive country cannot be governed on democratical principles, on any other plan than a confederation of a number of small republics, possessing all the powers of internal government, but united in the management of their foreign and general concerns.

... [A]nything short of despotism could not bind so great a country under one government.

Although the Anti-Federalists were united in their opposition to the Constitution, they did not agree on what form of government made the best alternative to it. Some still believed that the Articles of Confederation could be amended in such a way that they would provide a workable confederation. Some wanted the Union to break up and re-form into three or four different confederacies. Others were even ready to accept the Constitution if it were amended in such a way that the rights of citizens and states would be more fully protected.

The Federalists The Federalists focused their arguments on the inadequacies of national government under the Articles of Confederation and on the benefits of national government as formed by the Constitution. They were also much more favorably disposed toward commerce than were the Anti-Federalists, and they argued that a strong central government would foster the commercial growth of the new country. Moreover, the Federalist vision of society was more pluralistic than the Anti-Federalist vision. That is, the Federalists did not see society as made up principally of farmers, as did the Anti-Federalists, but instead viewed it as comprising many different and competing interests and groups, none of which would be completely dominant in a federalist system of government. For this reason, many later scholars have argued that the Federalists were more aware of the economic and social changes then transforming American society.

The most famous example of Federalist doctrine is *The Federalist Papers*, a collection of 85 essays by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and **JOHN JAY**. Published in New York newspapers and in two bound volumes distributed during the ratification debate, these essays were signed with the pseudonym Publius, taken from Publius Valerius Poplicola, a man who reputedly saved the ancient Roman republic. *The Federalist Papers* is an important American contribution to political philosophy and remains a classic today. It is also a great and authoritative commentary on the Constitution.

The Federalist Papers communicates the central ideas of the Federalists: the benefits of a Union between the states; the

problems with the confederation as it stood at the time; the importance of an energetic, effective federal government; and a defense of the republicanism of the proposed Constitution. *The Federalist Papers* makes a persuasive case for the necessity of federal government in preserving order and securing the liberty of a large republic. In doing so, it asserts that a weak union of the states will make the country more vulnerable to internal and external dissension, including civil war and invasion from foreign powers.

One of the most famous of its essays is *The Federalist*, number 10, by James Madison. In it, Madison addressed the issue of whether or not the republican government created by the Constitution can protect the liberties of its citizens. The problem that Madison saw as most destructive of popular government is what he called faction. A faction, according to Madison, is "a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community." Factions, Madison added, become especially dangerous when they form a majority of the population.

Madison divided popular government into two types, democratic and republican, and preferred the latter. In a democracy, all citizens participate directly in the decisions of government. In a republic, representatives elected by the people make the decisions of government.

In his intricate argument in *The Federalist*, number 10, Madison contended that a republican government of the kind envisioned by the U.S. Constitution can best solve the problem of faction not by "removing its causes"—which only tyranny can do—but by "controlling its effects." Madison proposed that elected representatives, as opposed to the people as a whole, will be more disposed to consider the national interest ahead of a particular factional interest. He also argued that the nature of an "extensive," or large, republic such as the United States will naturally frustrate the ability of a single faction to advance its own interests ahead of the interests of other citizens. With the huge variety of parties and interests in an extended republic, it becomes "less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens." Thus, Madison, in contrast to the Anti-Federalists, saw the large size of the United States as a help rather than a hindrance to the cause of liberty.

This is only one of the many points that *The Federalist Papers* makes in favor of the Constitution. However, as brilliant and carefully reasoned as *The Federalist Papers* may be, it probably did not greatly sway opinion toward ratification of the Constitution. The politics of ratification were instead influenced most by direct, face-to-face contact and negotiation. Nevertheless, *The Federalist Papers* aided the Constitution's cause by giving the Constitution's adherents ideas with which to counter their opposition.

The outcome Ultimately, the ratification provisions of Article VII of the Constitution, created by the Federalists themselves, were one of the best allies the Federalists had in their attempt to ratify the Constitution. After the Constitution had been created at the Constitutional Convention, Federalist leaders quickly returned to their states to elect Federalist delegates to the state conventions. The Anti-Federalists were not able to muster enough votes in response, though in several states, they nearly defeated the Federalists. By 1790, all thirteen states had ratified the document, giving the Federalists and their Constitution a great victory.

The Anti-Federalist outcry was not without its effects, however. By 1791, in response to Anti-Federalist sentiments, state legislatures voted to add the first ten amendments to the Constitution. Those ten amendments are also called the Bill of

Rights, and they have become an important part of the Constitution and its heritage of liberty.

FURTHER READINGS

Frohnen, Bruce, ed. 1999. *The Anti-Federalists: Selected Writings and Speeches*. Washington, D.C.: Regnery Pub.

Wills, Garry. 2001. *Explaining America: The Federalist*. New York: Penguin Books.

CROSS-REFERENCES

[Federalist Papers](#).

Citing this material

Please include a link to this page if you have found this material useful for research or writing a related article. Content on this website is from high-quality, licensed material originally published in print form. You can always be sure you're reading unbiased, factual, and accurate information.

Highlight the text below, right-click, and select “copy”. Paste the link into your website, email, or any other HTML document.

```
<a href="http://law.jrank.org/pages/5603/Constitution-United-States-FEDERALISTS-VERSUS-ANTI-FEDERALISTS.html">Constitution of the United States - Federalists Versus Anti-federalists</a>
```

User Comments

- | | |
|--|--------------------|
| A. Zhu | 6 months ago |
| this is heling me so much in my six grade study to learn about the anti-federal and federal things. I am going to get an a on it !!! :D | |
| Ashley | 8 months ago |
| What are the 3 reason they wont ratify the constitution i dont understand it.? | |
| greg patrick » billy_bob ((at)) yahoo dot com | 9 months ago |
| i agree that it shouldn't be a debate | |
| A. Rand | 10 months ago |
| i agree. jefferson and randolph actually resigned their postitions in th government due to jays treaty which was clearly a federalist act. this info was good, but look and express deeper insights than just the "facts". theres two sides to a lot of things. but not all | |
| jkk hh | 12 months ago |
| also, Jefferson wasn't actually an "anti-federalist" | |
| publius » rydr4lyfe26 ((at)) yahoo dot com | about 1 year ago |
| Good info, very easy to read. One very important point that you and many others omit though, the difference between Democracy and Republican governance is not simply that representatives speak for the people in a Republic. Democracy is majority rules no matter what, A Republic is majority rules PROVIDED that laws do not infringe on anothers RIGHTS. This is the biggest lie by omission in the history of politics. | |
| Britt » brittnee dot lee ((at)) yahoo dot com | almost 2 years ago |
| I think this is the first time I have come to fully understand Federalists vs. Anti-Federalists. THANKS! | |

john » ifetrp_don ((at)) yahoo dot com	almost 2 years ago
Thanks for this info..It helped me a lot!!!	
Ashly » weluvlikkilers10 ((at)) aol dot com	almost 2 years ago
Wow everyone is in AP classes im in junior american history and we had to read all the letters of fed vs. anti fed and now we have a debate on it this helped a lot thank you!	
America » losiwth ((at)) yahoo dot com	almost 2 years ago
wow this info was great :)	
Ginger » blacklab0511 ((at)) aim dot com	almost 2 years ago
OMG thank you soo much! this saved my butt on my research paper and debate in my honors american history class =]	
Veronica » katesheryl dot whitescarlett ((at)) yahoo dot com	almost 2 years ago
This is perfect for my assignment!	
Katie » ghostly_diver ((at)) hotmail dot com	almost 2 years ago
This help me with my debate for AP United States Class!!! Thanks	
Kelsey » Kelsay_g ((at)) sbcglobal dot net	almost 2 years ago
This is helping soo much with my Ap government class, we have We the People competition and this help my essay soo much!!	
Ryan » snowboarder187 ((at)) sbcglobal dot net	almost 2 years ago
Thank you very much for this valuable information. It helped a lot for my Core Humanities 203 paper comparing the two.	
samuel cooper » garmeansc ((at)) hotmail dot com	almost 2 years ago
Thanks man, you just save my butt. 2morrow I have a civics debate, with this information, I'm going to nail it or pass my civics debate. thank!!!!	
brianna » brownbrianna2010 ((at)) yahoo dot com	almost 2 years ago
this is so AWESOME i alomost failed my AP US History class key word almost	
Lucero :b » lucero052004 ((at)) yahoo dot com	almost 2 years ago
thanks :D this helped!	
freaking ap classes lol :b	
Chad » JrGator67 ((at)) aol dot com	almost 2 years ago
Thanks so much. Just saved my butt on my AP US History paper.	
Laura » FEG ((at)) yahoo dot com	almost 2 years ago
Thanks tons helped me alot on my civics pamphlet!!!	
Keep it going!!	
Siggy » Bry5592 ((at)) comcast dot net	almost 2 years ago
Yo thanks dog, i got like a superheated debate on Friday, today's wednesday, and we needed to know like arguments and counterarguments for federalists and antifederalists, so u guys just ameliorated my arguments tenfold, so thanks a lot!! :p	
brooke bosworth » j90 ((at)) yahoo dot com	about 2 years ago
muchas gracias	
Luis Vega » luis_vega58 ((at)) yahoo dot com	about 2 years ago
thanks this will help on my history debate	

Colt » no ((at)) hahahaha dot com

about 2 years ago

Thnx man this helped me for my debate 2

MadG » cyber dot ella ((at)) hotmail dot com

about 2 years ago

Thanks for the information! It was very helpful for my history class debate. :D

Ndamona » ndamonahashali3 ((at)) gmail dot com

over 2 years ago

Thanks very much, now I can complete my research of the anti-federlist and federalist war to the 10 ammendments

stevie raye » bigsunster ((at)) live dot com

over 2 years ago

I just wanted to thank you for your information on the Constitution.It was very useful in finishing my social studies Convention. Thanks again!